

Book Review: John McPhee's *Encounters with the Archdruid*

In his classic profile of former Sierra Club Executive Director David Brower's attempts to halt mineral mining, resort development, and dam construction in what remained of the American wilderness in the late 1960s, John McPhee chronicles a remarkable set of backcountry travels in the shadow of one of the modern environmental movement's founding fathers. Discerning readers will agree that the defining feature of *Encounters with the Archdruid*, that quality that sets it apart from other environmental histories, seems to be McPhee's ungrudging fascination with the ethos of Brower and his opponents, a rare curiosity for humanity that complements the author's gift for rendering wild spaces in crystalline prose. With McPhee an inconspicuous—though not impartial—presence in the company of men who wage verbal warfare against Brower's declensionist forecasts and preservationist ethic, “the Archdruid himself” wanders reverently through the Glacier Peak Wilderness, the Georgia sea islands, and the Grand Canyon, trying quietly all the while to convince his wayward companions of the sanctity and vulnerability of nature.¹

In the course of McPhee's narrative, as Brower's assembled Chautauquas unfold in a manner not unlike Plato recounting Socrates' dialectics, the breadth of the Archdruid's vision becomes apparent:

‘I'm prepared to say, here and now, that we should touch nothing more in the lower forty-eight,’ Brower comments. ‘Whether it's an island, a river, a mountain wilderness—nothing more. What has been left alone until now should be left alone permanently. It's an extreme statement, but it should be said.’²

Opposing such extremities are three seasoned antagonists, themselves nature lovers of different ilk: Charles Park, a renowned mineral engineer who takes pleasure in whacking unsuspecting

¹ John McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), 138.

² McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 226.

trailside rocks with a small hammer for the dual purposes of uncovering precious metals and warding off encroaching carnivores; Charles Fraser, a wily Georgian entrepreneur with a knack for installing unobtrusive, high-priced beach homes along picturesque coastlines so that “rationed quantities of the public” may stroll “the great beach” in harmony with nature;³ and Frank Dominy, then-commissioner of the U.S. Interior Department’s powerful Bureau of Reclamation, a product of FDR’s New Deal that embarked on “a ‘forty year binge’ of federal dam-building” that eventually included hydroelectric and irrigation projects on almost every major river in the West.⁴ *Encounters with the Archdruid* concludes with an account of the epic 1969 meeting of the Sierra Club’s “high tribunal,” resulting in the expulsion of Brower from his executive post for pursuing uncompromisingly rigid agendas that conflicted with more moderate policies mandated by the Club’s board of directors.⁵

That McPhee attempts to portray three distinct battlefronts in Brower’s breathtaking campaign to halt wilderness development speaks to the complex array of issues facing an emergent generation of so-called “environmentalists”—agitators not to be mistaken, argues historian Hal Rothman, with the progressive “conservationists,” nor the stalwart “preservationists,” of yesteryear. Here lay a philosophical split that ultimately drove apart Brower and his chief critic in the Empire Room of San Francisco’s Hotel Sir Francis Drake in 1969: lawyer Richard Leonard, former president of the Sierra Club and Brower’s longtime climbing partner.⁶ The social, political, economic, and environmental upheavals that estranged these two men were rooted in the aftermath of World War II, a time when “conservation’s advocates represented only one class of Americans, a group that could best be described as privileged,” and whose activities “were limited to species preservation and the protection of existing wilderness”—so long as such advo-

³ McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 142.

⁴ Hal K. Rothman, *Saving the Planet: The American Response to the Environment in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee), 99.

⁵ McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 213.

⁶ Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, 110.

cacy didn't conflict in any large measure with government interests.⁷ Such elitism, a throwback to the progressivism of Gifford Pinchot and the primacy of the war effort, would not stand.

In the postwar era, as suburbs multiplied and millions of Americans began vacationing in national parks and forests behind the wheels of shiny, gas-guzzling automobiles suddenly available to middle class families, "the democratization of conservation" began in earnest.⁸ Littered campgrounds, roadside clear-cuts, rivers foaming with synthetic chemicals, and debilitating smog trapped low over cities by thermal inversion layers pestered and confused Americans inundated with commercial and institutional rhetoric championing technological advancements that had beaten back the nation's enemies during the war years. Industrial solvents, pesticides, and all things plastic and electric and "new and improved" promised to revolutionize life for hard-working citizens, yet the insidious and increasingly visible side effects of such scientific achievements—laid bare in biologist Rachel Carson's groundbreaking *Silent Spring* of 1962—mirrored a creeping discontentment with the prospect of "mutually assured destruction" and other cozy doomsday scenarios prompted by the Atomic Age.⁹ "At mid-century ordinary Americans looked at the direction of their society with a combination of awe and trepidation," says Rothman, "and found nowhere to express the force of their dissatisfaction."¹⁰ In time the unabashed environmentalism of David Brower and his contemporaries would offer an important outlet for populist Cold War angst, but first the public needed a rallying cry.

The conservation movement's turning point came in 1950 with the approval of the Colorado River Storage Program (CRSP), a Bureau of Reclamation plan to construct ten dams capable of harnessing water for ranchers, farmers, and urban communities as well as generating electricity to support development in five western states. Leading the charge was a central figure

⁷ Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, 85.

⁸ Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, 85.

⁹ Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, 90.

¹⁰ Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, 86.

in *Encounters with the Archdruid*: the Bureau's Floyd Dominy, who understood that dams "in particular were easily presented as nationally important" because they "symbolized American industrial confidence and might, and the energy they produced was reassuring in the face of the Soviet threat."¹¹ But the CRSP overstepped its bounds in proposing the Echo Park Dam, a cement behemoth that would have flooded Dinosaur National Monument, a remote, 200,000-acre reserve in northwest Colorado. Brower and colleagues immediately recognized the principal at stake—the sanctity of virgin territories ostensibly set aside by Congress for all time—and moved quickly, galvanizing the public with stinging counterarguments, direct-mail campaigns, advertisements, and a newfangled color motion picture. Although other CRSP dams moved forward, Brower stalled legislative approval of the Echo Park project and in so doing emerged victorious from the "Dinosaur Battle." Grassroots responses to this and later controversies coalesced into environmentalism, a radical movement that would come to be seen as incompatible with mainstream Sierra Club members' preference for fraternalism and restraint.¹²

"In the view of conservationists," writes McPhee, "there is something special about dams, something—as conservation problems go—that is disproportionately and metaphysically sinister."¹³ McPhee makes clear that Dominy exemplifies for Brower the very essence of this menacing desire to destroy the preordained movements of rivers upon the Earth. "“Dave Brower hates my guts. Why? Because I’ve *got* guts,”” declares the Commissioner.¹⁴ As with Brower's sojourns to Glacier Peak with Park and Cumberland Island with Fraser, then, the prospect of Brower and Dominy rafting the Colorado River together sets a dramatic stage for polemic debate between "the conservationist and the Commissioner."¹⁵ Yet in keeping with his quasi-journalistic intent to avoid labeling villains too quickly, McPhee prefers to tease out the eccen-

¹¹ Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, 101.

¹² McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 164.

¹³ McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 158.

¹⁴ McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 168.

¹⁵ McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 175.

tricities of Floyd “the Kmish” Dominy, who finished a campfire debate “with a monosyllabic remark, walked away, put on his pajamas,” and “delivered to the unlistening moon his attack on the space program.” Tales of Brower’s indelible Sierra Club trail cup prove equally as amusing.

McPhee’s narrative also seizes on rare moments of agreement between diametrically opposed men whose lives are defined—albeit for different reasons—by the natural realm: Brower and Fraser’s joint commitment to ruling out private automobiles on the Cumberland Oaks development, for instance, Brower and Dominy’s mutual wonderment at afternoon sunlight falling on a barrel cactus, and the following alpine exchange between Brower and Park.

‘Population is pollution spelled inside out.’
‘I agree. At least, I agree that it is a very real problem.’
‘Families with more than two children should be taxed,’ Brower said.
‘I agree with that, too. Everything is hopeless without population control.’¹⁶

Ultimately, McPhee’s own admiration for the wilderness he encounters in observing—no, accompanying Brower betray his deference to the Archdruid’s “mystical and religious force.”¹⁷ After all, the fact that McPhee, like a patient disciple, literally trailed his protagonist to the ends of the continent in crafting this book speaks volumes about the faith with which he believed Brower to be an environmental prophet for the ages; indeed, Brower’s final reckoning before the Sierra Club board takes on a biblical tone. However, the author’s steadfast devotion to his subject does little to detract from his stirring portraiture, which deserves attention in its own right: “The river has worked its way down into the stillness of original time.”¹⁸ In sum, readers depart from the story marveling at both the stony and philosophical canyons its characters traverse.

¹⁶ McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 42.

¹⁷ McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 159.

¹⁸ McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 177.